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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 ANKARA 000294

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [MOPS](#) [TU](#)

SUBJECT: TURKEY: LARGEST WAVE OF MILITARY DETENTIONS TO
DATE POSES QUESTIONS: WHAT NEXT IN AKP-MILITARY CLASH?

REF: A. ANKARA 150

[1](#)B. ANKARA 53 AND PREVIOUS

[1](#)C. ANKARA 107

Classified By: Ambassador James F. Jeffrey, Reasons 1.4 (b,d)

[1](#)1. (C) Summary: On February 22 police detained 47 retired and active-duty military officers, including 17 flag-grade officers for -- according to press reports -- their alleged involvement in coup plots dating back to 2003-2004. Although coverage of the detentions blanketed the press, neither the Turkish General Staff (TGS) nor the government appear publicly outraged (in the case of TGS) or congratulatory (the governing Justice and Development Party) by the actions. There has been no official statement from the TGS, and PM Erdogan took a back seat by stating that the police were simply acting on order from the judiciary. (His attack dog Deputy PM Arinc was more polemical.) CHOD GEN Basbug announced that he has postponed imminent travel to Egypt, and late on February 23 called an emergency meeting with his four-star generals and admirals. Prosecutors have now detained all of the force commanders from the 2003-2004 period with the exception of former CHOD Hilmi Ozkok and former Turkish Land Forces Commander Aytac Yalman. End summary.

Unprecedented Arrests...

[1](#)2. (SBU) On February 22 nearly 50 retired and current military officers (and one NCO) were detained, likely for their alleged connections to the "Sledgehammer" (Balyoz) investigations. The homes and offices of many retired flag officers were also searched and police seized and removed documents for further inspection. Among those detained were four active duty admirals and 17 retired generals, including:

--Ergin Saygun: Former Deputy CHOD (2006-2008) and 1st Army Commander (2008-2009). Saygun is very well-known to the U.S.; he was our primary coordinator on anti-terrorism issues for many years, and had accompanied PM Erdogan during his November 2007 visit to Washington.

--Ibrahim Firtina: Former Air Force Chief from 2003-2005. Firtina was questioned in December 2009 by the Ergenekon prosecutors and has been implicated in the press for his role in the Sledgehammer Operation.

--Cetin Dogan: Former 1st Army Commander (2002-2004).

--Ozden Ornek: Former Navy Chief (2003 - 2005). Ornek's diary, which allegedly details discussions among senior

military officers to start a coup between 2003-2005, is being used by prosecutors as their primary source of evidence. Ornek was also questioned by Ergenekon prosecutors in December 2009.

--Engin Alan: LtG (retired).

--Suha Tanyeli: BG (retired). Tanyeli was head of the TGS Strategic Research Center (SAREM).

13. (C) The operation itself appears to have been well coordinated, as detentions and searches took place simultaneously in Ankara, Istanbul, Izmir, Bursa, Diyarbakir, Hatay, Kocaeli, and Bodrum. There have been no official pronouncements regarding the reasons for the operation, although the press widely suspects that the arrests are in connection with the 2003 Sledgehammer plan (which allegedly included a plan to overthrow the AKP government (ref B) and a separate plot known as "Operation Cage" (ref A)). Press reports state that many of the detained individuals' signatures were found on "Sledgehammer" documents. The majority of individuals, according to the press, are being interrogated in Istanbul.

...But So What?

14. (C) Despite the press fury, reaction from TGS and the government has been minimal. TGS has yet to make a official statement. However, TGS CHOD General Ilker Basbug postponed his official travel to Egypt -- an extraordinary and

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unprecedented step -- and late on February 23 called an emergency meeting with his four-star generals and admirals. When asked about the arrests PM Erdogan, in Spain for a state visit, told reporters that the police were acting on the order of the judiciary. Although a few "usual suspects" inflammatory statements from the opposition -- such as Republican Peoples' Party (CHP) Chairman Deniz Baykal's statement that the arrests made it feel was "as if Turkey was under occupation" -- made it into the press initially, overall press reactions were overshadowed the following day by other news stories. Markets opened up this morning, and business continues as usual.

Bad for TGS? Good for AKP?

15. (C) This is the largest "round-up" of military officers to date; the lack of an immediate reaction from TGS may suggest that the (current) military leadership is either fully willing to allow this investigation and the democratic process to continue unimpeded, or is waiting for AKP to hang itself on unfounded allegations. The military remains deeply unhappy about AKP's governance and is enraged at the steady campaign to erode the military's standing in Turkish society. To date, prosecutors have now detained all of the senior military commanders from the 2003-2004 period with the exception of former CHOD Hilmi Ozkok and former Land Forces Commander Aytac Yalman. And although the TGS seemed to be caught off balance and therefore was unwilling to speak up yesterday in strong opposition to these ongoing investigations, it seems unlikely that it will remain silent.

16. (C) AKP appears to have concluded that it gains politically from the arrest of military officers. Having perhaps nevertheless learned from past experiences, PM Erdogan was shielded from what could have been outraged criticism by secularists by conveniently being outside of the country. His absence also did not allow for any publicized "urgent" meeting with CHOD Basbug, as has happened in the past. Deputy PM Bulent Arinc's statements appeared designed to spin these developments as yet another example of how "times have changed" in Turkey and how the country is merely

going through a "normalization" period.

17. (C) The next few days will prove interesting and possibly pivotal. The judiciary has four days to either turn the detentions into formal arrests or release the individuals. If formal charges are brought, TGS will be forced to respond.

Likewise, a lack of substantive evidence will rebound on the Government, and will give credence to accusations that the long-running Ergenekon investigation has a deeper and more insidious design: to undermine AKP's secular opposition.

18. (C) Some knowledgeable embassy officers see this latest step as a more serious provocation that could trigger some type of unpredictable military reaction. We will see.

COMMENT

19. (C) To repeat the facts on this whole "Ergenekon" set of events:

a. There is some "fire" behind the smoke. The military obviously has plans to intervene if necessary in political affairs and can cite the 1982 constitution, endorsed by the population per referendum, which gives the military a key role in "overseeing" democratic governments' adherence to Atatürkist principles -- largely defined as by the military and its friends in the bureaucracy and judiciary.

b. PM Erdogan (supported by the EU and even many anti-Erdogan Turks who want to see the military out of politics) legitimately wants to rein in this "droit de regard" status.

c. But PM Erdogan realizes that elections are coming up, and that he did relatively poorly in last year's elections (38%) but brilliantly in 2007 (47% AKP win) when he played off the military's counter-productive threats.

d. Thus much of this is electoral politics, albeit of a

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"below the belt" contact sport variety.

e. All this is exacerbated by the thuggish authoritarian behavior of the police and judiciary (reflecting prevailing tendencies in this society, including in the military). In the U.S. a prosecutor or detective would simply have visited the generals in question to post questions. "Invites" to the precinct, reading of rights, indictments, arrests, and detentions follow only after the amassing of evidence and clear indications of a case winnable in court. Not here. Anyone even suspected of "having information" is hauled before the police (armed with automatic weapons), and humiliated before the press. It's always been that way; now it's happening also to the top brass and their friends.

f. Up to now, however, most of those so publicly humiliated are eventually released due to patent innocence, a lack of evidence (as in the recent "Special Forces officers planning Arinc's assassination" caper -- ref A) or because the judiciary throws the whole process out (i.e. the law making military officers subject to civilian courts -- ref C).

g. But every day is a new one here, and no one can be certain where this whole choreography will fall out of whack. Then, look out.

Jeffrey

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